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Johnson's Use of Outside Advisers

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The public's fascination with backstairs influence at the White House is centered in the Johnson administration upon a small group of able lawyers.

The press may incline to exaggerate the intimacy of these relationships and the influence of the outsiders. A recent newspaper article carried a picture of Edwin Weisl, the New York attorney who is a close Johnson friend. "At this very moment," the caption read, "he may be on the phone dealing with problems the President may want him to handle."

"On any given day," this article said, "Weisl can worry about Douglas Dillon's successor as secretary of the Treasury; a request to find out who planted a news story displeasing to the White House; a recommendation of someone for a judgeship and a check of White House files to see if anyone else had been nominated; a flight down to the LBJ ranch and a briefing on a report on the British prime minister's White House meetings."

These relationships also are exaggerated by hasty suspicions. Sen. Albert Gore's demand for an inquiry into a recent ruling by the Internal Revenue Service that benefit-

ted the DuPont family's holding company was linked in the press to the fact that the company had been represented by Clark Clifford, a White House aide in the Truman administration who now practices law in Washington.

Since Clifford's talents are utilized from time to time by President Johnson, as they were previously by President Kennedy, one easy assumption was that he had secured the ruling through the weight of his link with the White House.

Such inferences ignored the integrity of all the men concerned and their common necessity to ensure the virtue of a decision involving a great deal of money. It is far-fetched to believe that the President or Clifford or the new commissioner of Internal Revenue, Sheldon Cohen, would run the risk of dealing in personal terms on such a matter.

The incident, however, did suggest a need for fuller understanding of the public roles of these private attorneys. They are not a kitchen cabinet. They are not, as far as one can learn, deeply involved in government affairs on a regular basis. But they are available to Mr. Johnson as

sounding boards, talent hunters, counselors, and occasionally as trouble-shooters.

Every President has had people outside the government to whom he occasionally turned. But John Kennedy initiated the practice of calling frequently upon private attorneys for special services. Clifford supervised the transfer of the White House before the 1961 inauguration. John McCloy negotiated disarmament without leaving his private practice. Dean Acheson was drawn from his law firm for several missions.

An example of this usage occurred during the storm that followed the steel price rise of 1962. Secretary of Labor Arthur Goldberg and Robert Tyson of U.S. Steel met secretly to restore harmony. They were unable to agree and Tyson asked to see the President. Unwilling to be drawn into direct dealings, Kennedy arranged a meeting between Tyson and Clifford. He wanted Clifford to explore the avenues of compromise without official inhibitions.

The White House does not acknowledge any extensive roles for Johnson's attorney friends. But just as Weisl, Clifford, and Abe Fortas were

all active in the White House crisis that arose last October from the arrest of Walter Jenkins, it is obvious that they and others perform intermittent tasks for the President.

This access to the services of able individuals who will not take official posts is plainly valuable to the President. It keeps him within reach of fresh thinking by men who lived through past administrations and stand apart from the internal pressures of the present one. It adds another dimension to the human resources at the President's command.

The danger of conflict between the public and private interests of these men is so apparent that the danger itself becomes a safeguard. These men are acutely conscious that their mixture of private practice and public service is explosive. The misstep of taking a client's cause to the President or of using the President for leverage in the agencies obviously holds grave dangers.

The value of these men to the President lies in the excellence of their judgment and this quality is the best promise that their unique duality will not be misused.